

BRITAIN AND IRELAND HUMAN RIGHTS PROJECT

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ABOUT OUR PLANS

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Britain & Ireland Human Rights Project was established in January 1990 with the following objects:

1. to promote, carry out and commission research into the maintenance and observation of human rights in Britain and Ireland and to publish the useful results;
2. to promote and disseminate knowledge, information and understanding as to the maintenance and observation of human rights in Britain and Ireland:
 - by writing, publishing and distributing articles, reports, books and other documents and by promoting and assisting in the same;
 - by arranging and providing lectures and seminars and all other means of providing and exchanging information.

The Project, which is independent of any other body, was set up in order to highlight human rights arising from the conflict in Northern Ireland. It is not our intention to be prescriptive about potential resolutions of the conflict. We intend to take a determinedly non-sectarian approach and to examine human rights aspects of the conflict and their effects on communities on all sides of the political and religious divides in both Britain and Ireland. We hope to act as a catalyst for bringing together existing human rights organisations and interested individuals, such as lawyers, with a view to disseminating information, promoting informed debate, and assisting them to co-ordinate their work so that they can more effectively bring their collective experience to bear on problems which have long been identified but which seem far from solution.

We believe that current events in Europe and elsewhere in the world lend an urgency to the approach that we are seeking to foster. For instance, the debates surrounding democracy and civil liberties in Eastern Europe, the issues of the identity and rights of minorities that this has raised, the imminence of a single market in the EEC with its emphasis on freedom of movement and the concomitant diminution of the importance of national boundaries, and the inroads that are being made into apartheid in South Africa, all create a climate in which the maintenance and observation of human rights in Britain and Ireland require re-examination.

We have taken soundings from a number of human rights and civil liberties organisations in Britain and Ireland, among them the National Council for Civil Liberties (Liberty), the Committee for the Administration of Justice, and the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, all of whom have expressed support for our ideas and are now actively working with us.

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1. Human Rights Assembly

Working closely with other human and civil rights organisations, we are planning a Human Rights Assembly in 1991 which will examine whether and to what extent human rights in Britain and Ireland have been affected by the conflict in Northern Ireland. Its findings will then be published in the form of a human rights "agenda" on Northern Ireland and will provide the basis for a presentation to the international human rights conference, planned for later in 1991, to take place in Moscow as part of the CSCE/Helsinki process. Such a publication will also hopefully reach a wider audience and contribute to greater understanding of the issues.

It is planned to base the Assembly around an examination of the basic freedoms enshrined in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and the individual articles which make up the European Convention on Human Rights. This will provide a sharp focus for discussion and facilitate the formulation of any findings, whilst allowing interested bodies to participate in discussion of those aspects that concern them most. There will be no question of participants having to subscribe to an overall package of views or conclusions, and both speakers and participants will be sought from the broadest possible spectrum of opinions.

A co-ordinating group has been set up under the auspices of Liberty which will organise a preparatory conference on Human Rights Day (10.12.1990). This conference will consider the agenda for the Assembly and establish a steering committee for it.

2. Work in Northern Ireland

Members of the Project have made several trips to Northern Ireland and have established links with a number of groups involved in human rights work in Northern Ireland, notably the Committee for the Administration of Justice, and the Centre for Research and Documentation. We have also made contact with a number of single-issue human rights campaigns, both Protestant and Catholic. In August 1990 we attended an international conference organised in Belfast by Springhill Community House, at which the Norwegian Helsinki Committee launched its report on human rights in Northern Ireland. A meeting with the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights is pending.

3. Further work in Britain

We also have plans for co-ordinating, with the assistance of some of our patrons, groups with an interest in specific aspects of our work.

The first of these is a lawyers' group, under the auspices of Michael Mansfield QC. A seminar is being arranged for October 1990, to which lawyers from Britain, Northern Ireland, and Ireland will be invited to exchange information and discuss their experience of the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights. It is intended that this group will continue to meet quarterly and will produce an information pack which will help lawyers to familiarise themselves with the European procedures and legislation.

Other obvious candidates for such an approach include the ecumenical concern about the social consequences of the situation in Northern Ireland for communities in Northern Ireland and in the rest of Britain, and censorship. These will be developed as resources permit.

We are working through a programme of extending the dialogue on human rights issues in relation to Northern Ireland with other relevant organisations, including those concerned with peace and disarmament, the environment, poverty and development, women's issues, ethnic minority issues affecting the Irish community, and youth and student matters.

4. International work

As a first step to generating international interest in our plans, the Britain & Ireland Human Rights Project held a meeting on 27th June 1990 as part of the parallel activities section of the CSCE/Helsinki process conference in Copenhagen. The meeting was addressed by Martin Collins on behalf of the Project, Nuala Kelly of the Irish Commission for Prisoners Overseas, Michael Farrell, author and journalist, and one of our patrons, Father Bobby Gilmore. Our plans for a Human Rights Assembly were outlined and were well received. Equally importantly, many contacts were made and useful lessons learned.

In preparation for the Moscow CSCE conference, the Project attended a meeting with representatives of the Union of Lawyers of the USSR, a recently established non-governmental lawyers' association, who visited Britain in June 1990. Contacts have also been established with the organisers of the "Helsinki Citizens Assembly" to be held in Prague in October, and with a number of established and newly emergent human rights groups in Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary.

Representatives of the Project have also met Elizabeth Holtzman, Comptroller of New York City and board member of the US Helsinki Watch Committee, on her recent visit to Britain, to discuss the application of the MacBride principles on fair employment in Northern Ireland and to establish liaison for the forthcoming visit of the Helsinki Watch Committee to Britain and Ireland.

5. Publications

We are planning to publish a series of contributions to human rights debates in Britain and Ireland. Our first pamphlet is written by Kader Asmal, who is the President of the Irish Council for Civil Liberties. It takes the form of an expanded version of the D. N. Pritt Memorial Lecture which he delivered to the Haldane Society in December 1989, and is a critical survey of human rights issues arising out of the conflict in Northern Ireland and their implications for civil liberties in both countries. It is our intention to actively seek contributions from all points on the spectrum of these debates.

We also intend to publish information on human rights matters, and to promote such publications by other bodies. We are currently in discussion with Interights about a summary of relevant decisions of the European Court of Human Rights.

Also in progress is the compilation of an international directory of organisations with an interest in Northern Ireland human rights issues.

FUNDING

So far, the Project has been sustained by the voluntary efforts of a small group of people. We are now in the process of seeking to obtain core funding in order to put the Project on a sound footing, and of registration as a charity.

If these applications are successful, further applications will be made elsewhere to fund the Assembly, the co-ordination of the interest groups, and publications. Some of these initiatives will themselves generate income in the form of conference fees and sales.

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